

Sports in Illinois Prisons

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Teacher:

Some believe there is a fine line between pleasure and pain. In a similar way, some believe there is a fine line between pleasure and punishment. In Illinois there has long been the question of what is too much penalty and what is not enough. One of the leading arguments in this debate deals with recreation within prisons. Today virtually every prison, whether minimum or maximum security, has some form or forms of recreation for its prisoners; however along with this arrangement comes a heavily dominated, yet still two-sided argument. There are three basic pieces of information needed to form an opinion: what is included in recreation at a prison, what are the pros, and what are the cons?

Activities in Prisons include anything from weightlifting to team play; each prison has a little bit of something for everyone. The Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center in East St. Louis, Illinois has two weight areas, a basketball court, and several other areas for recreation. This is the case with many Illinois prisons. As one drives by, he or she might see prisoners running, playing basketball, or even weightlifting within the towering barbed-wire fences. In the mid-security Pontiac Correctional Facility in Pontiac Illinois., the inmates had a baseball team which traveled to other prisons across the country to compete. Softball leagues, handball, volleyball, and basketball were among the many activities of Joliet, Illinois' maximum security institution. The Joliet institution used its recreational privileges as an incentive for the inmates to remain well-behaved.

Most people view recreation in prisons as a positive thing. Early Laster, Warden of Southwester Illinois Correctional Center, is definitely one of these people. He states, "If they didn't have recreation times, their left-over energy would cause problems... It keeps them busy

and their minds active". Although the facility is only minimum security, he believes that possible problems are greatly reduced due to the prisoners' opportunity during recreational times to vent their anger in more positive, productive ways; this helps the prisoner to live a successful life even after they are released.. Dr. John D. Scouller, superintendent of the Pontiac Institution from 1872 until 1891, was the first in his prison to establish sports. "Early in his career, he realized the importance of recreation in the development of young men and inaugurated the inmate baseball teams" This may have contributed to why the people of the town were so fond of him. He maintained order extremely well among the inmates, and no complaints were ever made against him.

Not everyone agrees with the idea of recreation being beneficial or even allowable in prisons, though. Some people in the general public who strongly believe in punishing a prisoner until they will never want to commit a crime again, see recreation as an easy break for the inmates. Societies attitudes are often interpreted as easy. "[I] can go to school, play pool, football, ect. Great!! Not jail at all!" Some ask why a prisoner should be allowed to have fun. Others see it as just another opportunity for a fight or an argument to be aroused over something as simple as a game. However, in contradiction to this, Laster believes, "those arguments and fights are going to happen no matter what. As long as there is a captive audience around, [fights] can be expected."

There are multiple recreational activities in many prisons across the state of Illinois. All types of facilities have them, whether minimum, mid, or maximum security; security does not seem to affect the variety of activities offered. Some use recreation to promote health among the prisoners, and aid them in obtaining successful, well-balanced lives when they are released back into the general population. Others use recreation as a reward for good conduct, ultimately

benefiting the staff. It seems as though people who encounter prisoners or prison life on a regular basis are generally for the use of recreational facilities. Although not everyone agrees with this arrangement, recreation and sports remain a large key in the lock of the Illinois prison systems today. [From Henry Barrett Chamberlin, The Prison System in Illinois; Joseph E. Ragen, Inside the World's Toughest Prison; "Recreation and Educational Facilities in Prison" Prison! Me! No-way! Trust Ltd. [www:fp.pmnwt.f9.co.uk/infp25](http://www.fp.pmnwt.f9.co.uk/infp25). (Sep. 26, 2003); student historian's interview with Early Laster (Warden, Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center), Spet. 18, 2003; Pontiac Sentinel, Oct. 16, 1891; Rick Telander "Sports Behind the Walls," Sports Illustrated Oct. 17, 1988.]